

Bush's Two-Man Song and Dance

Commentary by Ali Gharib

Last week, the commander of the U.S. occupying forces in Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus, and the overseer of what will be the largest embassy in the history of the world, U.S. ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker, were trotted out before Congress and television talk shows to give a progress report on President George W. Bush's latest counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq—a multifaceted tack that has become known by the name of its troop-level escalation aspect: “the surge.”

As expected, in his testimony Petraeus advocated a “pause” in the troop reductions, saying that the troop-level reductions would continue as scheduled until July, when they would be halted for 45 days of “consolidation and evaluation.” The pause notion raises a troubling question for Petraeus and other supporters of the surge strategy: If the surge is indeed working and great strides have been made inside Iraq, why does the strategy need to be altered to—as the plan stands now after the testimony—leave one-third of the surge's increased troops in place indefinitely?

Although they have been celebrated on Capitol Hill for the partial “successes” of their strategy, including a reduction of violence and apparent vanquishing of al Qaeda in Iraq, Crocker and Petraeus—awkwardly placed as politically appointed career professionals put on display to defend a politicized strategy—came under heavy fire from congressional Democrats, who asked for some sort of measurable standard for evaluating the progress in Iraq. The lack of such a measurement, insisted the Democrats and even some Republicans, indicates a continuing Bush policy of indefinite military presence in Iraq. Petraeus and Crocker failed to offer any meaningful suggestions.

Instead, they gave a vague conceptual notion of “conditions” that would need to be met in order to further reduce troops and did not offer specifics about what those conditions would be. The troublingly ill-defined goals included a “free” Iraq that poses no threat to its neighbors or the United States, becoming a beacon of democracy in the heart of the Arab Middle East. In other words, the mindset of the administration is still very much set on the same standards it had originally planned for the quick invasion and regime change in Iraq in the neoconservative-dominated Pentagon of yesteryear under the watchful eyes of [Douglas Feith](#) and [Paul Wolfowitz](#). These goals, of course, have since been discredited as unrealistic given the trouble and chaos that followed the invasion that those selfsame Defense Department hawks had either failed to anticipate or just plainly ignored warnings about. The comprehensive sum of Petraeus' “conditions” was something akin to what your grandfather used to tell you about true love; you'll know it when you see it.

Indeed, it makes a lot of sense for the administration to avoid setting more goals for Iraq, since the war there has consistently failed to accomplish any of them. In fact, those more specific goals the Democrats were clamoring for had already been set—and not met. They were called benchmarks for the Iraqi government to show signs that the “space” created by the surge was producing results in the way of political reconciliation that

would eventually allow significant drawdowns and, eventually, a complete redeployment of troops out of Iraq.

Despite the notable absence of any mention of benchmarks in the duo's prepared opening comments during the questioning on the Hill, Republican hawks lauded Petraeus and Crocker for accomplishing some benchmarks. Democratic critics cited much smaller numbers of completed benchmarks as a counterpoint. However, the numbers bandied about by hawkish members of Congress distort U.S. accomplishments to make them appear more comprehensive. They use loose definitions of the benchmarks to make them appear as completed goals, when in fact very few of the goals have been fully tackled. For example, legislative benchmarks include both the enacting *and* implementation of certain measures. But it is one thing to pass a law, quite another to put it into practice. Thus, although the Iraqi Parliament took some important steps towards societal reconciliation in passing a package of laws in February, it has yet to follow through on implementation of them or even demonstrate that some of these changes are even possible on the ground.

It's no wonder, then, that many of the savvier hawkish commentators would not step into the trap of promoting questionable benchmark numbers and have instead chosen to distance themselves from the benchmarks altogether. Asked by the *New York Times* to provide questions for Petraeus and Crocker, former Undersecretary of Defense Doug Feith, who's old Defense office is notorious for having tailored intelligence to the policy in Iraq and by doing so misleading the nation into war, backed away from the importance of benchmarks. In a brief *Times* op-ed entitled "Legislation's Limits," he contends that, "discussing benchmarks for Iraqi political progress, American legislators focused on whether the Iraqis were enacting legislation. But the essential issue is how well the political process in general is functioning—and new laws are only one aspect."

A key architect of the surge, [Frederick Kagan](#), who helped author a January 2007 report for the [American Enterprise Institute](#) that spelled out why the surge was necessary, didn't even bother to defend his proposal in a column for the [Weekly Standard](#), which appeared shortly after Petraeus' testimony. Instead, he lashed out against Democratic support for an increased presence of troops in Afghanistan, with a ridiculous nod to the fact that al Qaeda's central leadership is no longer there and most likely is in Pakistan.

Many commentators have been quick to point out the open-ended conflict produced by Crocker and Petraeus' Catch-22. It goes something like this: We can't drawdown troops if things are not going well because we are committed to our goals in Iraq. Likewise, if things are going well, we can't drawdown because that would potentially negate any gains that have been made. Or, as presumptive Republican presidential nominee Sen. [John McCain](#) (R-AZ) put it in his statement during one of the hearings, commanders and politicians alike must ignore "calls for a reckless and irresponsible withdraw of our forces at the moment when they are succeeding." Again, there was little detailed explanation of what success means in this context.

One clear definition of success, according to supporters of the war and reinforced by Petraeus and Crocker's testimony, has been the incorporation of Sunni groups known as *Sahwa* ("awakening" in Arabic) into the U.S. counterinsurgency strategy. But even this success, while it has contributed to a decline in violence, is tempered by details that emerge from astute observers and experts on Iraq.

While the legislation package passed in Iraq this winter is certainly a boon for political movement, it hardly represents significant political reconciliation. The case in point is the cessation of hostilities with the 90,000 or so Sunnis who have joined the Sahwa groups and gotten on the U.S. dole. But while they have ceased battling both the United States and the central Iraqi government, their alliance is solely with the United States as part of a bilateral agreement. The Shia-dominated central government and Sahwa groups still view each other with great hostility due to innumerable sectarian differences and a history rife with conflict and competition, and the central government deliberately drags its feet on incorporating the Sahwa fighters into regular security services. And despite U.S. promises, the Sahwa groups have yet to attain political power of any kind.

No matter how hard Feith wants to stretch the combination of the Sahwa movement and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's recent assault on rival Shia militias into some sort of grand reconciliation between the Shia and the Sunnis, all the anecdotal evidence and experts do not corroborate it. In Iraq, the old adage "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" applies in spades. Having spent extensive time in Iraq with Sahwa groups, journalist Nir Rosen told an audience at the Center for American Progress this month, "There is absolutely no political reconciliation in Iraq. Not on a political level, not on a community level."

More troubling still, in many ways the fragmentation of Iraqi society has gotten worse. Rosen and other close observers have noted that a big reason for the drop in violence attributed to the larger surge strategy is that there are no longer people of different sects regularly interacting with each other. Although a drop in violence is welcome, the lack of integration can be largely considered a failure of former Secretary of Defense [Donald Rumsfeld](#)'s light-footprint doctrine—a strategy that failed to bring any sense of security to Iraq for much of the first four years of the U.S. occupation. The chaos that ensued allowed the sects to engage in a largely successful program of ethnic cleansing within their neighborhoods—leaving tens of thousands dead and an additional 4.5 million internal and external refugees. The evidence can be found in the slow trickle of returning refugees—which is incidentally discouraged by U.S. and Iraqi authorities, particularly because of the potential for sectarian flare-ups. Those who were minorities in formerly mixed Baghdad neighborhoods, for example, don't return to their homes but rather to "safe" neighborhoods populated by their own sects and surrounded by large walls. This has left a de facto situation of bottled up sectarian strife. These criticisms, when raised to Crocker and Petraeus, went unanswered, and the false banner of reconciliation continues to be waved over the ruins of Iraqi society.

Perhaps most disturbing in Petraeus and Crocker's testimony was their willingness to frame so many of the dangers in Iraq as emerging from two sources: al Qaeda and Iran.

The continued myth of al Qaeda supremacy in Iraq should have disappeared with the formation of the Sahwa groups in the Anbar Province to oust al Qaeda before the United States even began working with them. A realpolitik evaluation would reveal that those former Sunni insurgents felt backed into a corner and thus began an association with al Qaeda. To confuse their former allegiance as a potential ideological collaboration in the future is folly—and can be explicitly rejected based even on Crocker and Petraeus’ telling of events to Congress. Any assertion that U.S. withdrawal will turn Iraq into a “breeding ground” for al Qaeda is patently false. The reality is that al Qaeda will never hold significant territory again in Iraq.

Similarly, neoconservative devotee [Max Boot](#)’s assertion that withdrawal would result in “a major victory for Shiite and Sunni extremists who will continue to attack us in the future” reveals a deep-seated ignorance about the nature of the nationalist aspirations of both Shia and Sunni insurgent groups. He paints them as being mere surrogates of al Qaeda or Iran who are hell-bent on attacking the United States, ignoring that they are forces aimed at ending the occupation of their own country.

Furthermore, Crocker and Petraeus’ admonition of Iranian involvement with rogue factions of anti-American cleric Muqtada al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army militia is little more than a light reprise of the continued drumbeat for war with Iran. Petraeus has noted that bombs falling on the green zone were made in Iran in 2007—certainly a troubling thought—but fails to note that the bombs dropped on the Mahdi Army in Basra as part of Maliki’s failed offensive were made by the United States at an unknown date. Furthermore, as Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-CA) pointed out in light of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s reception with kisses on an official visit to Baghdad, Iraq apparently does not view Iran as a threat. Rather, the threat is mainly in the minds of those in the United States. This should not come as a surprise to anyone who has taken a look at the U.S. executive branch and the neoconservative perspective on Iran. The resulting question for the rightists seems to be how a free and prosperous Iraq can be engendered with any sort of involvement at all from Iran. The question that needs to be asked is how Iran can be more helpful, as it was in the toppling of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001 and 2002 and in the negotiations to end fighting between the Iraqi government and the Mahdi Army factions earlier this year.

Perhaps the most shameful episode during the testimony last week was when Sen. Evan Bayh (D-IN) questioned Petraeus about whether reasonable people could agree to disagree with the general’s analysis. Petraeus is in the difficult position of having to represent the view of his boss—the president. But his response to Bayh—a lengthy pause, followed by an assertion that his plan was the correct one—was a slap in the face of those pushing for constructive dialogue. It revealed that the same cocksure and uncompromising attitude exuded by those who helped push the country into the war remains at the helm. Clearly, solutions to fixing the mess in Iraq are not to be found in the hands of those who made it.

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